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Spiritual Formation and the Dance of Embodiment: Lessons from James K. A. Smith and Augustine

Darryl Tippens

There are few things clearer in the faith than this: *the fundamental aim of Christianity is to form disciples in the image of Jesus Christ*. The New Testament supposes—or presupposes—that Christlikeness is possible. It goes further. Christlikeness is not only *possible*: it is *expected* that ordinary human beings will come to think, act and look like Jesus. Miraculously, the horrific error of Adam’s primal mistake in Eden is being reversed before our very eyes: “And all of us...are being transformed into the same image [of Jesus Christ] from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Cor 3.18).

With nearly 2000 years in the rearview mirror, it is fair to ask, “How is the project of ‘Christification’ going?” The evidence suggests we’ve got mixed results so far. No one has arrived at the goal, and many have forgotten the goal entirely. Happily, we live at a time of renewed interest in spiritual formation. Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, Dorothy Bass, Henri Nouwen, Christine Pohl and many others have awakened us to an array of spiritual disciplines, increasing our understanding of the role of prayer, Bible study, meditation, fasting, service and so forth in spiritual maturation. Some, like Bass and Pohl, have enlarged the list of spiritual practices to include such daily activities as practicing hospitality, caring for the physical body, serving meals and so forth. Yet we are not done. There is more to discover about a truly robust, incarnational spirituality.

“A dance of embodiment”

James K. A. Smith, professor of philosophy at Calvin College, has done much recently to awaken us to the “liturgies” of an authentic spirituality. By *liturgies* he means the panoply of concrete, embodied practices—whether sacred or secular—that shape not only our thinking but also our feelings, our perceptions and our “way of being in the world.” Religious formation is not merely, or even primarily, an intellectual enterprise: it is the product of various communal practices. Smith’s approach takes very seriously Paul’s admonition: “Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Col. 3.17). Our *deeds*, not just our beliefs, are basic to the formation of Christ followers. A key point is this: deeds are not just the product of thought or belief. It’s a two-way street. Habits also shape belief. A worldview obviously affects behavior, but behavior can also affect worldview. As William T. Cavanaugh observes, “Jamie Smith shows us that the gospel does not primarily happen between our ears but in all the movements of the body by which we are formed and in turn form the world.”¹ *The body* is vital to formation, for God meets us in and through our “creaturely conditions.”² We must recognize the imagination, the body, and the non-rational dimensions to our personhood.³ Smith invites us into the “dance of embodiment.”

1. See James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013). Cavanaugh’s assessment appears on the back cover.

2. *Ibid.*, 33.

3. *Ibid.*, 29–41.

When we experience things, Smith points out, the whole person, not just the intellect, “perceives and interprets the world.”⁴ We *know* things through our bodies, in a visceral way, even when we may not consciously know that we know them, a fact exploited in Malcolm Gladwell’s bestseller *Blink*.⁵ We experience a *bodily knowing*, a “take on the world that resides in our bones, as if imagination is ‘closer’ than our gut.”⁶ So, Smith asserts:

Our action is always enaction—part of a dance of embodiment and our environment, a mode of interaction that is governed and propelled as much (or more!) by our emotional appraisal of our situation as by our rational reflection of it.... The ultimate upshot of my argument is to suggest that educating for *Christian* action will require attending to the formation of our unconscious, to the priming and training of our emotions, which shape our perceptions of the world.⁷

Staying with Smith’s line of argument is worthwhile, for he helps us see how discipleship has been practiced through the centuries. If we can bracket our modernist assumptions and silence our inner Descartes for a moment, we will understand better why classic practices—which are both imaginative and kinesthetic—need restoration and amplification. Smith urges us

...to reactivate and renew those liturgies, rituals, and disciplines that intentionally embody the story of the gospel and enact a vision of the coming kingdom of God in such a way that they’ll seep into our bones and become the background for our perceptions, the baseline for our dispositions, and the basis for our (often unthought) action in the world.⁸

Smith’s goal is ambitious: to reclaim “the incarnational, sacramental wisdom that is ours.”⁹

“Surely God is in this place!”

Faith is a compelling way of life, lived on the ground. The spiritual life involves feeding, healing, holding and touching. In Christ, heaven and earth meet: “All the way to heaven is heaven, for Christ said ‘I am the Way,’” observed Catherine of Siena. The spiritual life involves the senses: “O *taste* and *see* that the Lord is good” (Ps 34.8, emphasis added). Worship engages *all* the senses. The communion service, for example, brings the olfactory and gustatory senses into play as we receive the bread and the wine; holy kisses and holy hugs require touch; preaching and praying bring the auditory sense into play; kneeling, bowing and lifting hands in prayer are necessarily kinesthetic. Singing is especially resonant because it is obviously sensuous—auditory and kinesthetic. Yet, paradoxically, Christian worship leads us to a place beyond the senses:

You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice.... But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.... (Heb 12.18, 22)

Worship is liminal, one of those “thin places,” as N. T. Wright calls them, where time and eternity intersect.¹⁰ We share Jacob’s discovery that heaven and earth are interpenetrating domains. With him we exclaim: “Surely

4. Ibid., 35.

5. Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2005).

6. Smith, 38.

7. Ibid., 38.

8. Ibid., 40.

9. Ibid., 41.

10. “The place where God’s space and our space intersect and interlock is no longer the Temple in Jerusalem. It is Jesus himself.... Thus, though Christians believe that Jesus is now ‘in heaven,’ he is present, accessible, and indeed active in our world.” Wright, N. T., *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 2006), 94–95.

the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it.... How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” (Gen. 28.16–17). Christianity vastly enlarges the *place* where God is to be found. No longer must we travel to Bethel or Jerusalem. We can meet him everywhere. This is why we sing, “Heaven came down and glory filled my soul!”

Once we acknowledge the creational dimension, *spiritual* formation takes on a decidedly *physical* character. What is true of our gathered worship proves true for all life. Our bodies are inherently sacramental. We are temples of God’s Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6.19), and daily we participate in actions that take on the character of a sacrament: “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice” (Rom 12.1). Action, time, place, sights, sounds, smells, movements, gestures, customs, rituals, etc.—all these potentially become part of the “equation” of spirituality. A cup of cold water given in Jesus’ name becomes a sacred rite, virtually Eucharistic, a bond between heaven and earth. Heaven *and* earth are full of his glory (cf. Isa 6.3).

Augustine of Hippo: A Case Study

The embodied spiritual formation which Smith describes is as old as the New Testament, and it can be seen in the lives of some of the most famous disciples of Christ. Augustine, the celebrated bishop of the fourth- and fifth-century church and the author of *The Confessions* and *The City of God*, illustrates some of the ways one can be habituated or formed in the faith. As a pre-modernist, Augustine was not limited by a modernistic understanding of formation. One of the greatest thinkers in human history, Augustine obviously valued learning, but his Christian formation also is instructive for it illustrates Smith’s point that the process is not exclusively or even primarily intellectual...but embodied, holistic and sacramental.

For Augustine this fact is foundational and incontrovertible: *God is everywhere*. The God who fills heaven and earth awakens the young Augustine to the beauty of creation: “the sun and the moon, beautiful creations.”¹¹ Two potent philosophies of the day—Manichaeism and Platonism—often caused him to distrust the physical order, but his suspicion of nature was tempered by his devotion to Scripture. God’s created order is good, and the great disciple rejoices that nature leads him back to the Maker of all things: “You who fill everything are wholly present in everything which you fill.”¹² Because God is “wholly present in everything” —“not far from us is your omnipotence, even when we are far from you”—the opportunities for formation are numerous. Even in his most rebellious moments, upon reflection, Augustine could see God’s shaping work: “For you are always with me....”¹³ The *liturgy* of his life, and the first demonstration of God’s grace in his life, began with Monica’s care: “at my mother’s breast you had already begun to build your temple and had laid the foundation of your holy dwelling place.”¹⁴ Monica and the nurses proved to be channels of God’s love, not themselves the source of good: “it was not from them but through them” that he received grace.¹⁵ Augustine, like James K. A. Smith, cautions against the fatal error that would divorce the disciple from the creation.

Models of Faith, Discipled by Books

One of the great sources of spiritual wisdom, encouragement and solace for Augustine was the host of spiritual exemplars who showed him the way of Christ and the way to Christ. Many people taught and inspired him. One unnamed child famously played a critical role in Augustine’s formation. While in deep crisis over what to do with his life, the struggling man heard a child chanting over and over, “Pick up and read, pick up and read...” (or “Take it and read it, take it and read it...”).¹⁶ Obeying the child’s admonition, he picked up a

11. Augustine, III.6. Quotations included in this article come from two editions: *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. Rex Warner (New York: New American Library, 1963) and *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford UP, 1992).

12. Ibid., I.3.

13. Ibid., II.2.

14. Ibid., II.3.

15. Ibid., I.6.

16. Ibid., VIII.12.

Bible and read Romans 13.13–14: “Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts.” Soon after, he became a Christian.

While Augustine presents this as the dramatic turning point in his life, it is obvious that he had *already learned and absorbed* the gospel long before this moment. Formation had come in many ways: through his mother, Monica, preeminently as we have noted, but also through a remarkable circle of friends that included the great preacher and hymn composer, Bishop Ambrose, who eventually baptized him. And there were Nebridius, Verecundus and, above all, Alypius, whom he calls his “heart’s brother.”¹⁷ People learn best from other people as noted by the apostle Paul, who wrote, “Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us” (Phil 3.17). It would be hard to overestimate friendship’s role in Augustine’s conversion. He notes about Ambrose: “I began to like him, at first indeed not as a teacher of the truth, for I had absolutely no confidence in your Church, but as a human being who was kind to me.”¹⁸ There is scarcely a moment in Augustine’s life when he is not surrounded by influential personalities.

Augustine’s spiritual formation took other shapes as well—in his vast reading, for example. Athanasius’ biography of Anthony, the great Egyptian monk, played a critical role in his conversion. Throughout his life, Augustine was drawn to books. Even non-Christian authors helped lead him to Christ. The pagan Cicero altered Augustine’s “way of feeling,” turned his prayers to God, and gave him “different ambitions and desires.” Cicero’s ideas directed the young man towards God: “I was on fire then, my God, I was on fire to leave earthly things behind and fly back to you. . . . [Cicero’s *Hortensius*] inflamed me with the love of wisdom (which is called ‘philosophy’ in Greek).”¹⁹

Reading as a spiritual practice has largely been ignored in contemporary discussions of the disciplines, yet it is a time-tested means of spiritual formation for many. In modern times, the conversion of C. S. Lewis offers a potent example. Not only was Lewis shaped by his wide reading in classical, medieval and Renaissance texts but his own works also have, in turn, influenced millions of followers of Christ.²⁰

Music and Faith Formation

There is much else in Augustine’s life that suggests the practices that changed the young rebel into a towering disciple of Jesus Christ. To conclude, let us consider church music. Augustine loved singing. In fact, his encounter with Ambrose, a gifted composer, was crucial in his conversion. Augustine was overwhelmed by the singing of Ambrose’s church in Milan: “How deeply was I moved by the voices of your sweet singing Church!” he wrote. “What tears I shed in your hymns and canticles! . . . Those voices flowed into my ears and the truth was distilled into my heart, which overflowed with my passionate devotion. Tears ran from my eyes and happy I was in those tears.”²¹ Augustine’s passion for music is evident further in his constant citation of David’s psalms, which Augustine must have heard sung daily in the church.

The intrinsic beauty of vocal music greatly moved Augustine. He appreciated the way in which song expressed the truths of the faith. He also loved the singing for another reason: the church’s corporate singing expressed a potent solidarity that held the church together in difficult times. The church in Milan was under political duress. Violence against the Christians appeared imminent, but the vigorous singing inspired and sustained the anxious disciples: “there was great enthusiasm among the brethren as they joined together both

17. Ibid., IX.7.

18. Ibid., V.13.

19. Ibid., III.4. Someone might think that Augustine’s program of reading does not support the notion of an embodied spirituality; yet Augustine’s reading, like that of most literate people in the ancient world, was an embodied practice. Silent reading was virtually unknown. Reading was oral and often social—one might say kinesthetic. Augustine was puzzled to observe Ambrose reading silently, for it was a strange practice (VI.3).

20. Alister McGrath, in *C. S. Lewis—A Life* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2013), documents the extraordinary spiritual influence of Lewis’s works (363–379).

21. Augustine, IX.6.

with heart and voice in the singing.”²² As we consider the opportunities for spiritual formation today, we should think about the capacity of singing to shape hearts and lives, to witness to the truth and inspire faithfulness.

The Disciplines as Space for the Holy Spirit

As James K. A. Smith and Augustine demonstrate, many different practices can contribute to formation. The experience of natural beauty, corporate singing, wide reading and healthy friendships are just a few of the pieces in the mosaic of spiritual formation. It is encouraging to learn that the audacious project to become like Christ does not require flight from the created world. In fact, a kind of “worldly spirituality” is part of the solution to the problem.²³ To be shaped in the image of Jesus Christ, one does not need a degree in philosophy or theology, but practices that evoke postures of humble openness and receptivity are essential. One must relinquish one’s body, heart and mind to the power of the Holy Spirit. Spiritual disciplines do not *save* us, we must say with certainty, but they can open up a space for God to enter, form, reform and transform us. As Simone Weil says, “Grace fills empty spaces, but it can only enter where there is a void to receive it.”²⁴ Over time these habits can mold us into humble creatures capable of receiving the gift of grace.

Yes, we “learn Jesus” through the mind, but also through body and bone.²⁵ Augustine “panted” for God “deep down in the marrow of [his] soul....”²⁶ Jamie Smith calls for renewed liturgies, rituals and disciplines that will cause a vision of the kingdom of God to “seep into our bones.”²⁷ These hopes and longings square well with the Paul’s declaration of the centrality of the heart, the *splanchna*.²⁸ The *heart*, according to Paul, understands things the *head* knows nothing of. We must take seriously the Pauline paradox that it is possible to know the love of Christ through a different kind of knowing, a celestial knowing, that mysteriously *surpasses* earthly knowledge (Eph 3.19). This is a comprehensive kind of knowledge the lover feels throughout his whole being for the Beloved. Paul, Augustine and Smith seem, finally, to agree with Pascal: “the heart has its reasons, which the reason does not know.”²⁹

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22. Ibid., IX.7.

23. *Pilgrim Heart: The Way of Jesus in Everyday Life* (Abilene, TX: Leafwood, 2006): 21–27.

24. Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (1952; repr., London: Routledge, 2002), 10.

25. Luke Timothy Johnson suggests how we “learn Jesus” in *Living Jesus: Learning the Heart of the Gospel* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000).

26. Augustine, III.6.

27. Smith, 40.

28. In biblical terms *heart*—Greek *splanchna*—indicates “entrails, bowels, the physical organs of the intestines,” as in 2 Cor 7.15, Phil 1.8. The term includes emotion and feeling (e.g., compassion), but encompasses much more.

29. Blaise Pascal, *Selections from the Thoughts*, trans. and ed. Arthur H. Beattie (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davison, Inc., 1965), 96.